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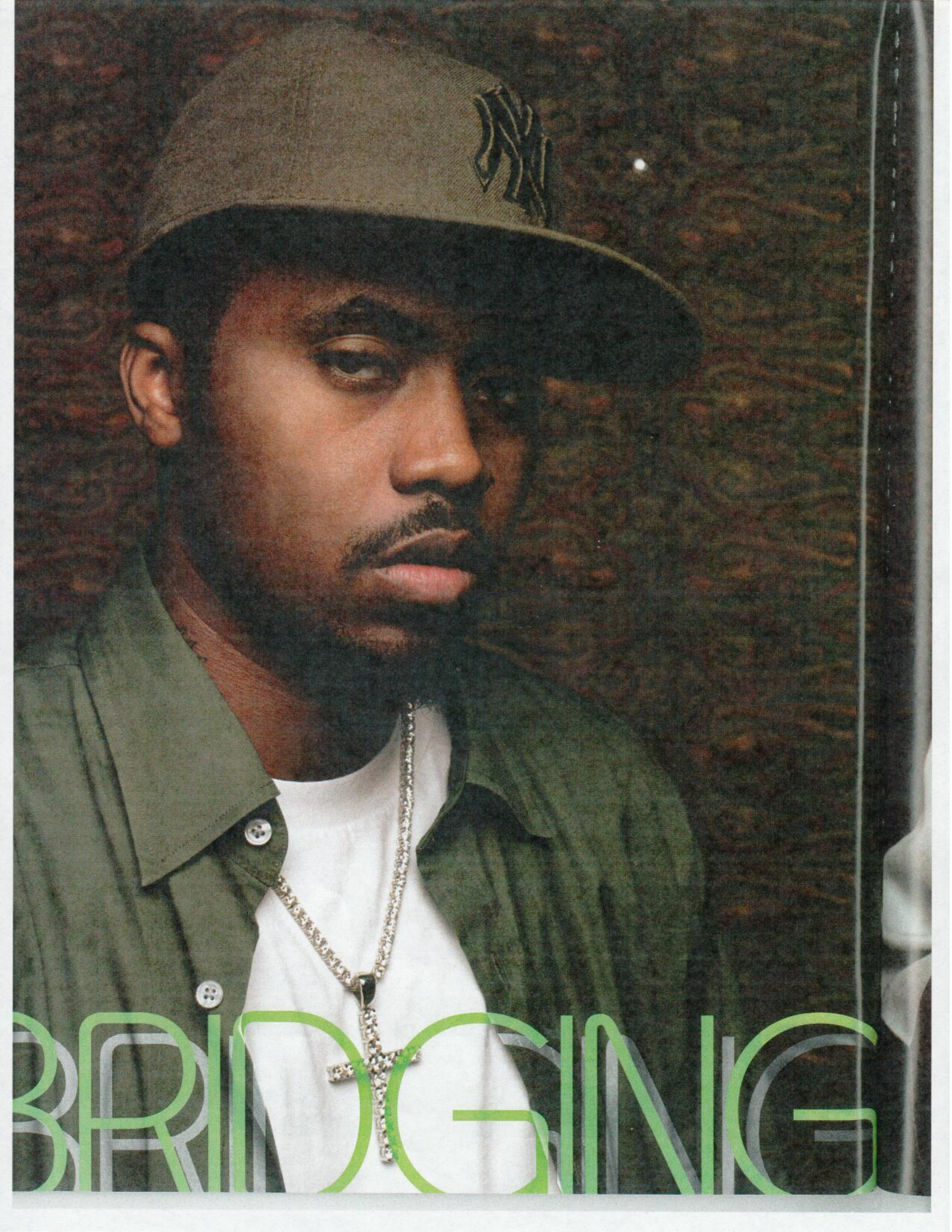
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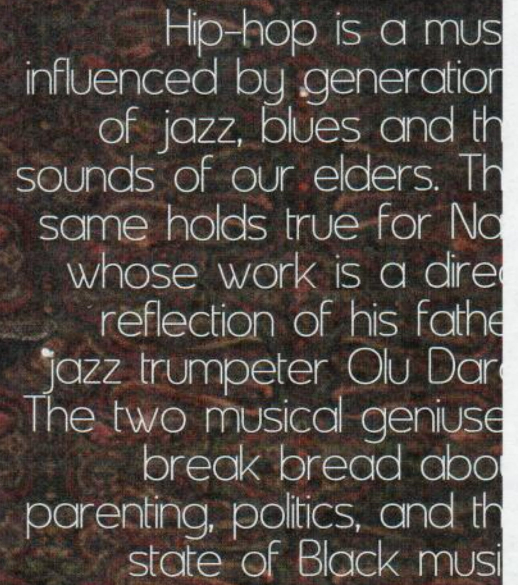

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Olu (*center*) shares a laugh as a young Nasir (*right*) stares into the future

"So many of my peers grew up without their fathers. I couldn't imagine that being my story. So that alone made the relationship [with my dad] golden." —NAS

Before Superman and rap stars, a boy's first hero is supposed to be his father. To the adoring son, his father represents both daddy and deity, punisher and playmate. But if he's Black, this patriarch must survive society's traps long enough to guide his seed along the turbulent path to manhood. In the ghetto, this is a rare feat, as the struggle to overcome poverty often lures Black men to an early grave. And so Nasir Jones considers himself blessed to have known his father, Olu Dara, all his life.

"So many of my peers grew up without their fathers," laments Nas. "They never had that tight structure in the household with a man there, so a lot of them are wild and crazy. I always thought of that and felt bad for them. I couldn't imagine that being my story. So that alone made the relationship [with my dad] golden."

A pounding rain is sweeping across Atlanta's bustling Peachtree Street, clearing the air of the morning's haze. In the midst of the sudden storm, jazz legend Olu Dara and his superstar son are sharing the spotlight at a downtown photo shoot. The venue—Churchill Grounds, a swank jazz haunt adjacent to the city's landmark Fox Theater—is an appropriate locale for the visual reenactment of Nas and Olu's recent musical collaboration, "The Bridge." The song is featured on Nasir's latest double CD, *Street's Disciple*, and explores the God Son's Mississippi lineage, while finding a common ground between the genres of hip-hop and blues.

An hour before today's shoot, father and son arrive separately. Nas walks in first, unassuming and casual in pastel plaid shorts and a short-sleeved shirt. On the heels of the rapper is his 10-year-old daughter Destiny, a spirited and articulate child. Behind her is Angel, her black, longhaired chihuahua. Nas politely greets the handful of workers on the set and immediately retreats to a corner to whisper into his cell phone. Minutes later, Olu, a cool breeze in jeans and a ball cap, saunters in.

"Is that my grandbaby?" he exclaims with surprise, making a beeline for the excited girl who runs into his arms. Olu then turns to greet his son, who's since left his secluded spot. Like brothers on the street, the two share a pound and quick embrace. There's a knowing warmth that exchanges between the two men and the effect is evident—for the first time since entering the room, Nas is smiling.

"We've been close ever since he was born," says Olu, 63, of his relationship with his son. "We've never even had an argument."

That's not hard to believe. As Nas and Olu take their seats for the first set-up of the day, they chuckle like old friends and endure the camera's incessant clicking with mild interest. Having withstood the stresses of divorce, fame, and death, their bond is thick. It's a rapport Nas is most proud of and celebrates on "The Bridge."

"My father was a great father," the 31-year-old reveals between takes. "That's why we had to make this record as an example for the kids whose fathers were either shot down in the street or taken down by the prison systems or drugs. We have to let them know, alright, those brothers are gone, but it's up to us now to break the cycle and become incredible, strong family structures for our future."

Born September 14, 1973 to Olu Dara and Ann Jones, Nas grew up in the much-fabled Queensbridge Projects with his younger brother Jabari (aka Jungle). A quiet, thoughtful child, he liked to draw comic books and dance under the name Kid Wave. His father, a jazz trumpeter, was often away from home, performing around the country. But during breaks on tour, Olu would take his young son with him to band rehearsals or trips to Greenwich Village and Central Park.

"I took Nas to Lincoln Center to see one of the first rap movies," Olu remembers. "It could've been *Krush Groove* or something like that. And I remember Nas seeing LL Cool J walk by with a radio on his shoulder. Nas was young and he said, 'Daddy, he's gonna be a star.' I didn't know who the hell LL was, but Nas was always particular about predicting who's gonna be a star. Once, he picked up a Michael Jackson album, *Off the Wall*, he said, 'He's gonna be big, big, big, *big* daddy!'"

Certainly, there were happy times during Nas' youth, but the Jones household experienced its share of troubles as well. Olu's frequent absences and lifestyle began to wear on the family and by 1985, Nas' parents were separated after two decades of marriage. The young poet would later write candidly about those memories on "Poppa Was a Player" and "Fetus"—both from 2002's *The Lost Tapes*. On "Poppa," Nas raps: "My poppa played the street all day/ Mama was either home or at work while we played inside the hallway/ She sacrifices all she got to feed us/ When she was alone, she cried by the phone/ Peeping out the window heated/ But still I didn't see it/ Mama hid it from us/ We was kids younger/ Til' we got bigger/ On to bigger things that we knew what the time was/ That daddy was leaving this crib and my mom's love."

"What Nas was talking about on 'Poppa Was a Player' happened like when he was four years old," says Olu incredulously. "Now that amazed me, that he could put together stuff like that. And his metaphors are so real. I heard

Frames: Courtesy of Olu Dara

Styles: Robyn Price. *On Nas:* Jeans by **Rock-N-Republic**; shirt by **DKNY**; shoes by **Pro Keds**. *On Olu:* Jeans by **Phat Farm**; shirt by **BRUNO**; hat by **Energie**

Olu (*left*) and Nas loungin' at Atlanta's Churchill Grounds

the song where he's in his mother's stomach watching us have an altercation and I said, 'My God! We never discussed that.' But stuff like that amazes me about him."

"It's a knowing you automatically have once you get to know who your parents are," says Nas quietly. "You see the chemistry between them in the household and you kinda put it together in your head."

Now a father whose job also requires him to spend long periods of time away from his daughter, Nas reflects on his dad's parenting with understanding.

"I totally understand what he was going through and what he had to deal with by leaving home all the time. But I go through it more difficult than he did," admits Nas, referring to his occasional bouts with baby mama drama. "My mom was a great example of how to be a woman. She never played any games. Unfortunately, my generation is a lot younger with kids. I was once a child raising a child. So it was a lot easier with my dad and my mom. I really respect my mom for being a woman and not being evil. My mom was truly one of God's greatest gifts to me and to the world. They don't make women like that too much anymore."

From left: Olu dresses a young Nasir; Nas and Olu have a jam session

Frames: Courtesy of Olu Dara

There's a hint of sadness in Nas' words, as he fondly remembers his mother who passed away from cancer in 2002. Yet that same year, the void left by Ann's passing was eased slightly when Nas met his current fiancée, R&B singer Kelis Rogers.

"She came at the right time," says Olu, who attended the P. Diddy party where the two met. "He needed a woman with some intelligence, some love and some wisdom about life. And on top of that, she cooked, which Nas kept raving about. I like Kelis because we can talk. She wasn't like the other girls that were afraid of me."

A slim, small-statured man, Olu is hardly physically intimidating. But his slick, out-of-left-field wit may catch some off guard. At least that's been the case with past girlfriends Nas has introduced to his father. "I guess they don't understand my humor," he shrugs. "Most of them say to him, 'Your father's weird!'"

Olu Dara was born Charles Jones III on January 12, 1941 in the steamy, segregated town of Natchez, Mississippi. He grew up in a peaceful household of nine—seven kids, two parents—and maintains there were never any disputes or arguments among the family. "We were just very close and natural," he says. "Even today, we're all adults and it's just laughter at all times."

Both Olu's father, Charles Jones II, and his grandfather, Charles Jones, Sr., were local singers, so it was no surprise that young Olu was musically inclined. When he was seven, a visiting musician taught him to play the trumpet, and by the age of 10, he was spending his summers traveling and performing in his teacher's band. As a young adult, he attended the Navy School of Music in Washington, DC before setting out to sea for several months. In 1964, he left the armed forces and moved to New York City. A few months later while attending a dance, he met Ann, the woman he would eventually marry in 1965. By the '70s, he had adopted the Yoruba name "Olu Dara," which means "God is good."

Later on in his career, Olu formed two of his own bands, the Okra Orchestra and the Natchezsippi Dance Band, recording two

"When I see Nas' success now, it's no different than what I felt when he was first born. I expected the best for him." —OLU DARA

critically praised albums, *In the World: From Natchez to New York* (1998) and *Neighborhoods* (2001). Yet, one of Olu's greatest productions came when he became the proud parent of a baby boy, Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones, which means "Son of Olu Dara."

And perhaps as destined, Olu's first born grew up to become a rap icon. Although quitting school in the eighth grade and briefly selling drugs, the street griot turned a short but memorable verse on Main Source's 1991 posse cut, "Live at the BBQ," into a much-worshipped career that both heightened hip-hop's verbal skill level and made poetic realism a sought-after lyrical style. From the perfection of 1994's rousing ghetto epic *Illmatic*, to the vulnerable emotion of 2002's *God's Son*, Nas' music, even during its weakest moments, solidifies rap's place as a revolutionary art form. And now, Nas' latest project, *Street's Disciple*—the title of which was taken from the first two words he spit on "Live at the BBQ"—caps off 30 years of life experience.

"I've done everything an MC would want to do, from the '90s era until now. So now I'm just on to new things," he says. "And in order to get new, every few years, I have to kind of find my roots again."

Nas' understanding of himself and his environment was so keen as a child, that his intuitive observations significantly influenced his father's career. The young prodigy convinced papa Olu to play his own preferred style of jazz rather than the avant-garde form he'd been accustomed to.

"Nas used to hear the bands I was playing with," recalls Olu. "And he said, 'Wow, it sounds like the background music to a Frankenstein movie.' And I said, 'Well, I'm not really into that [music] but I got to do something to feed y'all.' So he said, 'Why don't you just do what you want to do?' I'll never forget that conversation. I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'You know, you like to mix up your grooves and stuff like that.' I was like, 'How does he know? He never heard me do that other than in my mind.'"

Then later as an adult, Nas persuaded his father to record his first LP in 1998. "I was very happy doing what I was doing with my [Natchezsippi] band," says Olu.

"I played for everything—concerts, nightclubs. So Nas called me up and said, 'Dad, why don't you record? Come to Columbia [Records]. I want to show my peers what my father's into.' I said, 'I don't know, man. I don't think so.' And soon as I hung up the phone, Atlantic Records called me. They had been trying to get me to record for almost 10 years. So I said, 'This is an omen or something.'"

Likewise, Olu's lasting affect on Nas came as a maxim to "always be himself." "His biggest thing was to never follow," says Nas. "You can learn from the great ones, but develop your own style."

Olu's lessons of individuality not only encouraged Nas' artistic expression, but it gave the outspoken MC the confidence to speak on topics that many rappers shy away from.

"I don't vote because I'm not in that place right now. I don't feel the need to. If I really said what I felt, people would think I belong in a straitjacket," explains Nas, who surprisingly referred to George W. Bush as "gangsta like me" during a show in New York's Central Park this past summer. "I'm just a believer in hope. I hope that whoever gets voted for turns shit around. I like leaders who fought for their ground like Huey Newton. Politics and all that stuff, it's so advanced, it's so deep and the people in the communities get the wrong impression. We don't know who our politicians are. We don't know who they represent. So we're real detached. So for me to get up and say, 'I'm gonna vote,' and pretend like I know what's going on with someone I know nothing about makes no sense to me."

Going further into his world analysis, Nas addresses the co-opting of hip-hop culture by mainstream America. "The God-given gift of American music was given to uneducated Black people in the South who were in the fields working and slaving," he says. "But the ones in control are the ones that designed the game. So they make money off it. Until there's another Berry Gordy, that's how it's gonna be."

Olu also recognizes that jazz audiences are increasingly less Black than in its early years, but he looks at the racial shift as having economic origins. "If Blacks had the same money as Whites have to [attend jazz shows] they would be there," he asserts. "The music is not as alien to us as it is to White people. So therefore we don't have to go to a show because the music comes from us. We could do it in our backyard."

As dusk begins its journey across the Atlanta sky, the scene at Churchill Grounds is coming to a close. Seated next to his father in a booth for the last pose, Nas is visibly restless. Perhaps he's anxious to get back to the side of his life he enjoys the most: his family. He glances over at Destiny, who is busy scolding her dog for some slight indiscretion.

"My daughter says I'm a good father," declares Nas thoughtfully. "I wouldn't say it, but my daughter says I am." His voice trails off. And then he adds: "The greatest reward in this world is healthy, smart, positive children."

Looking over at his own child, Olu also feels pride. "When I see Nas' success now, it's no different than what I felt when he was first born. I expected the best for him in whatever he wanted to do. I'm very proud of him, but it's not like a doting father. It's like something I expected him to do."

Indeed, Nas is happy to bask in his father's love. "At the end of the day you want your parents to be proud," he says. "When my mom was alive, all I wanted for her was to be proud of me. Like, I made it. You know? *We* made it. So when he's proud of me, that means everything."